Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

Testimony submitted by Dr. Jeff Koenings
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Introduction

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee for inviting me here today. My name is Jeff Koenings and I am director of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to testify on the proposed Pacific Salmon Recovery Act, which would authorize the Secretary of Commerce to provide financial assistance to the states of Washington, Oregon, California and Alaska for salmon habitat restoration in coastal and upland drainages.

My department unequivocally supports the act, and believes the guidelines it sets forth are compatible with salmon recovery efforts now underway in Washington state.

As you know, Washington state is facing one of the biggest public policy challenges of its history - how to restore the health of a Pacific Northwest icon, wild salmon.

This challenge involves not only the state and federal government, but countless counties, cities, tribes, businesses, farmers, environmentalists, citizens groups and others from across Washington.

The issue literally has the potential to touch, in some way, big or small, the lives of all our citizens.

No one, myself included, would pretend to have all the answers on how we are going to meet this challenge. We are presently wrestling with a number of issues.

For example, how do we make sure citizen volunteer groups, our front-line soldiers in the salmon recovery war, receive the support they need from the state in order to be successful? And how do we ensure shared recovery goals are carried out under shared leadership?

Despite these issues, though, I believe we have made significant progress. Already, numerous public and private entities have joined under Governor Gary Locke's Salmon Recovery Strategy to put in place the foundation for a collaborative, bottom-up approach to salmon recovery that, ultimately, should ensure accountability for public moneies spent to restore wild salmon populations.

This foundation recognizes the vital role watershed habitat restoration must play, the vital role local citizens must play, and the vital role science must play in recovery efforts.

The Challenge

Our challenge is immense.

Presently, Washington has 16 species of salmon listed as either threatened or endangered. Still more have been proposed for listing. These listings geographically cover nearly 75 percent of the state. And that area contains about 93 percent of our citizens.

Recovery of these species would be difficult under any circumstances, but the widespread alteration -and outright destruction- of salmon and other fish and wildlife habitat has made the job of rebuilding our wild salmon runs even more difficult.

A recent federal study concluded that approximately 70,000 acres of private, undeveloped land in Washington state are annually converted to urban, industrial and other human uses. It's estimated we have already lost 90 to 98 percent of our estuaries and wetlands to development in coastal urban areas. And in Puget Sound alone, 70 percent of the tidal wetlands have been destroyed.

Given this metamorphosis of Washington's physical landscape, rebuilding wild salmon stocks would seem a daunting task. But the added complexities posed by the political landscape make it an even more daunting task.

Consider the Puget Sound chinook. A little over a year ago, the National Marine Fisheries Service listed the chinook as threatened. At the turn of the century, nearly 700,000 of these remarkable fish annually returned to the cold, clear, clean water of Puget Sound.

Today, however, their number has dwindled to fewer that 18,000. The habitat these fish depend on-much of which has been altered for industrial and other purposes- lies in the middle of one of the most populous and prosperous urban centers in the United States, the Seattle/King County metropolitan area.

Not only must the chinook pass through some of the most highly-utilized waterways in the state to make it to its spawning grounds, some must weave their way through the waters of six, and perhaps up to a dozen, different federal, state and local jurisdictions.

And each of these jurisdictions can -and often do-have their own land use and other laws that can affect the salmon's chances to spawn, rear as juveniles and then to migrate to sea. It is here in the freshwater habitats that most of the salmon mortality takes place.

Meeting the challenge

So it is against this dynamic backdrop that the people of Washington state are proceeding with salmon recovery.

Regional recovery planning efforts involving local government officials, the tribes, citizens and others are now taking place in various parts of the state, including the Upper and Lower Columbia River regions and what we called the Tri-County area-or the heavily urbanized counties of King, Pierce and Snohomish. (Appendix 1).

On the state level and in my own agency, we have made major changes in recent years in the way we manage harvests and hatcheries to meet our goal of providing harvest opportunities on hatchery fish and

healthy runs of wild salmon, while making sure weak or listed wild salmon make it to their spawning grounds.

Working in tandem with our co-managers, the treaty tribes, we have implemented changes in harvest practices ranging from fishing area closures and gear modifications, to marking hatchery fish so they can be distinguished from wild stocks.

We have increased monitoring of catches; we have stepped up enforcement efforts to ensure compliance with regulations; we have dramatically reduced the number of commercial fishing licenses; and we have curtailed some fisheries and reduced seasons and quotas.

We have also started the complicated and very expensive task of transforming our hatcheries. Originally built as fish factories to provide fish for commercial and recreational harvest, we are repositioning them to serve the dual purpose of recovering wild salmon runs and providing sustainable fisheries.

Currently, a third of the Department's 90 hatcheries are used for wild fish recovery, but the number is expected to grow. With strong support from Senator Slade Gorton and Congressman

Norm Dicks, we are in the early stages of developing a comprehensive hatchery reform strategy for state, tribal and federal hatcheries in Puget Sound and western Washington. The underpinnings for the strategy will be based on science and led by an independent Hatchery Scientific Review Group charged with reviewing current processes and policies and identifying scientific needs.

State lawmakers response, local citizens role

Even with changes in harvest and hatchery practices, it has long been realized by state policymakers and others that for wild salmon recovery to become a reality, Washington would have to focus on the loss of spawning and rearing habitat in our watersheds.

To address the issue-and to spur local interest and involvement in salmon recovery- Washington state lawmakers adopted the Salmon Recovery Act and created so-called "lead entities"-or local citizen groups-to promote and coordinate salmon recovery activities in their communities and watersheds (Appendix 2).

At present the state has 21 lead entities responsible for using limiting factor analysis and other watershed assessment tools to identify and scientifically prioritize projects that benefit salmon habitat within local watersheds. Lead entities are also charged with developing an overall salmon habitat restoration strategy within their local area.

In addition to lead entities, state lawmakers also created the Governor's Salmon Recovery Office to provide a forum to develop a statewide salmon recovery strategy. The state also formed the Joint Natural Resources Cabinet for state agencies to collaborate on and streamline salmon recovery areas and regions. And they next created the Salmon Recovery Fund Board, chaired by Bill Ruckelshaus, to develop statewide procedures and criteria for allocating funds to state agencies, lead entities and others for salmon habitat projects and recovery activities.

The funding board is comprised of 10 members-five citizens and five directors from state natural resource agencies, including myself. Last March, the board, which meets periodically in public session, used both state and federal monies to fund more than 100 projects worth over $13 million. Projects ranged from

culvert and fish ladder improvements to riparian, to wetlands and flood plain restoration. Grants ranged from less than $3,000 to well over $1 million. The board expects to award another round of grants at the end of this year.

The administrative arm of the Salmon Recovery Board is the Interagency Committee on Outdoor Recreation, which ensures compliance with grant agreements as well as performing other duties.

Washington lawmakers have also recognized the importance of science to salmon recovery and created an Independent Science panel comprised of five members selected by the Governor.

The purpose of the panel is to provide an external review of the comprehensive salmon recovery plans before they are submitted to the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and make sure sound science is being applied. The panel does not review individual recovery projects.

The Department and salmon recovery technical and scientific assistance

I can think of no individual who has sounded off more than myself on the need to provide sound technical and scientific assistance to lead entities, and to make sure science is our compass in all our salmon recovery efforts. I know that to some, particularly those who work with me on a regular basis, I must sound like a broken record on these two fronts.

To meet the need to supply technical assistance to lead entity personnel in the field, my Department recently formed what we call a Watershed Stewardship Team. Comprised of Department personnel, team members are responsible for helping lead entities prioritize projects and then monitor these projects for their effectiveness.

Team members are also charged with facilitating long-term planning efforts that address land use, human population growth and the effect of both on salmon resources.

On the science front, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, through its Wild Salmonid Policy, provides broad, scientific guidance for ensuring the needs of wild salmon are met in our fisheries habitat and hatchery management activities.

The policy, which is now part of the Governor's statewide Salmon Recovery Strategy, provides guidance in such areas as genetic diversity, spawner escapement, ecological interactions and the use of selective fisheries.

In addition to this policy, the department and the tribes are also in the process of updating our population status reports for all salmonid stocks in the state, and are continuing work on comprehensive management plans for coho and chinook -plans that take into account the myriad of harvest, hatchery and habitat issues affecting the stocks.

With funding provided by Salmon Recovery Funding Board, the Department and tribes are also continuing work on a habitat inventory assessment project that provides detailed data on salmon habitat conditions in specific geographic areas. This data collection, generated at the local watershed level, can be "rolled up" to mark progress toward achieving salmon recovery goals or de-listing criteria.

Science and technical data derived from these and other projects can be invaluable. It can go a long way

towards ensuring recovery efforts carried out in watersheds are effective for generations to come.

All too often, though, science is developed and then not used or used improperly by people attempting to solve real problems in the real world. Or, if it is used, it is applied inconsistently in a haphazard fashion.

That is why I advocate the formation of a separate state Science Review Team that would work with lead entities and the Salmon Recovery Funding Board to make sure recovery planning is science-driven and that the right science is reaching the right people in a comprehensible and timely fashion.

Such a team could, I believe, help develop consistent scientific criteria for screening grant proposals and provide a forum to promote information exchange among scientists and technicians and ordinary citizens working at different levels in salmon recovery.

The team could also oversee the continued development of analytical tools used in various watersheds, and help determine the effectiveness of proposed habitat projects across watersheds within Evolutionary Significant Units.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges still before us in the state of Washington, I believe, as I said that the outset of my remarks, that the process we have put in place is largely sound and that we are on the right track. We have built the foundation for our recovery efforts.

We are now dependent not just on the continued efforts of state and local leaders, but our citizens, whose enthusiasm and dedication to make salmon recovery a reality has to be our anchor.

On the federal level, we are dependent on the efforts of members of this subcommittee and many others for our success. We appreciate your efforts and thank you.

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